

THE PERISTYLE HOUSE AND PORTICATED COURT HOUSE: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to deal with the problem of cataloging the remains of the wealthy Roman townhouse from the imperial period indifferently between the wealthy peristyle house and the porticated court house. Architectural and typological differences of these two circulation and distribution areas are shown. The historical origins of the peristyle and the porticated court are used to clarify the differences between these two house typologies and why it is necessary to document and differentiate them in order to obtain more accurate conclusions about domestic and social life of the High Empire.

The indistinct use of the terms: peristyle house and porticated court house to describe houses with an axial distribution of domestic space in wealthy urban houses of the Imperial period is a problematic that needs a thorough debate. There must be a clear distinction between the two terms in order to draw rigorous conclusions on the inhabitants of each individual case study and to assess the functionality of some domestic areas within the context of Roman city society where the remains were found.

Thanks to Meyer's research (1999) one can differentiate between the peristyle house of Imperial period, the atrium and peristyle house and the Hellenistic peristyle house. The peristyle house of Imperial period is identified as the house with an axial layout of vestibule, peristyle and dining room, and for sharing similar conceptual arrangements with the Republican atrium house. However, when identifying this construction style in the bibliography, it is described as peristyle house and porticated court house without explaining the use of one nomenclature or the other. In Meyer's work (1999), examples of the two typologies appear under the same label: axial peristyle house. Though, in this study it was logical not to make this distinction since her main objective was to insist on the new concept of domestic distribution with an axial layout and open area of distribution distinct to the atrium (Fig. 1, a). Having es-

tablished the existence of this new spatial arrangement existing during the Empire, it becomes important to distinguish between the peristyle from the porticated court, as neither have the same morphologic or social impact in the Roman World.

THE PERISTYLE HOUSE FROM THE HIGH EMPIRE IN AN URBAN CONTEXT

The peristyle house is essentially the house built around a peristyle, which was the main transit area of the *domus*. This space of transit and distribution of the house has a *viridarium* and different porticos. The peristyle house may have more than one transit area – secondary peristyles, courts, etc. – but the main and central distribution of space is determined by the peristyle (Fig. 2, a)

The conjunction of a garden with porticos is the adaptation of the Greek peristyle that the Pompeian house makes and which is known in 2nd Century BC. The Hellenistic peristyle was in fact the patio or central space – often paved with stone mosaic or marble – which communicated with the rest of the rooms. This house style has been documented regularly since 5th. Century BC and was built into late antiquity throughout Greek influenced area of Eastern Mediterranean (Bonini, 2006: 60-65; Segura, 2005: 86-75). The Romans adapted this patio with porticos and added natural elements imitating the Hellenistic garden of a more public and worshiping concept.

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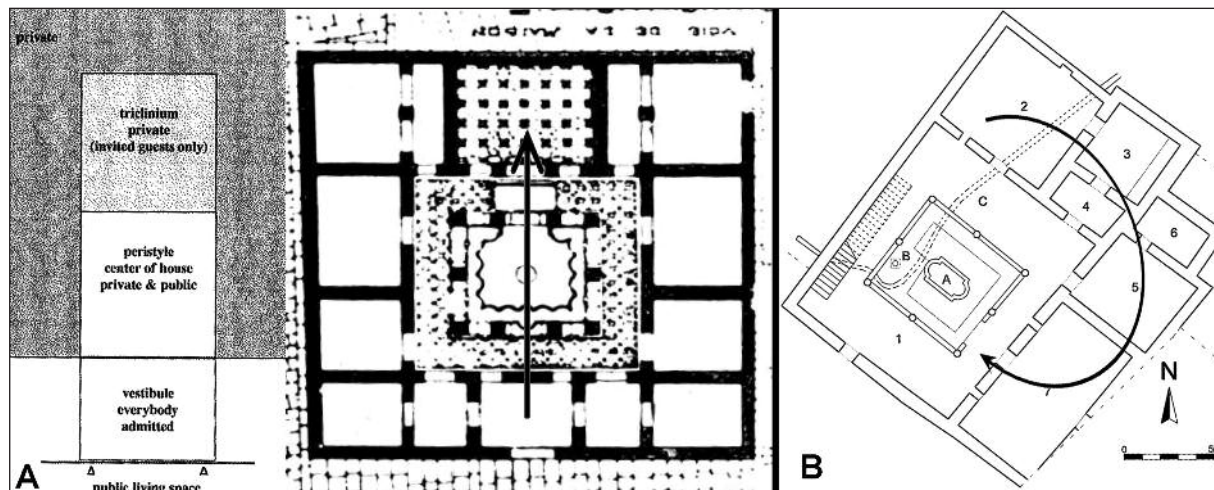


Fig.1. A: The three axial areas which mark peristyle Roman house from the High Empire (scheme: Meyer 1999; plan: *Maison 70 des jardinières* of *Thamugadi*, Rebuffat 1969); B: View of the centripetally Greek house (plan: Athens 10, Bonini 2006).

The Roman peristyle house and the Hellenistic peristyle house can also be differentiated by the structural and distributional arrangement. As previously pointed out, Roman houses sought an axial distribution between the vestibule (usually of large dimensions) and the dining room with the peristyle in-between (Meyer, 1999): (Fig. 1, a). By contrast, the Hellenistic house, although arranged around the peristyle as well, differs in that rooms are arranged centripetally and not axially or symmetrically (Zaccaria, 1995: 291-292). (Fig. 1, b)

This axial layout of Roman peristyle houses is equivalent to atrium houses composed of *fauces*, atrium and *tablinum*. However, the difference between the two houses is not only changing the type of domestic areas but also a variation in the concept of axial layout. While in the atrium house the axial distribution of the *tablinum* with regard to the vestibule allowed a full view of the interior, in the case of the peristyle house they tried to protect the interior vision (Ghedini, 2003: 319). In many examples, such as the Exedra and Birds houses of *Itálica* (Rodríguez, 1991), although there is still an axial distribution of space, solutions such as the construction of concave walls in the vestibule, are sought to make a screen effect and not permit a clear vision to the interior. Other measures adopted were to create secondary accesses and vestibules in the houses. This concept change was almost certainly due to the rejection during Imperial times of the widespread belief of the republican society that the *fauces* and *atrium* were part of common and public rooms (*Vitruvius* 6, V, 1).

A final component to consider concerning the axial layout in the peristyle house is that the three

coordinates (vestibule-peristyle-dining room) might have variations. An example of this variation is the one known as the “bayonet”, in this case the vestibule is located parallel to the dining room. Another variation would be finding the dining room located at an octagonal coordinate in relation to the entrance. The research carried out by Ghedini (2003) on peristyle houses in Tunis and the cataloging of peristyle houses in Northern Africa by Rebuffat (1969) serve to illustrate the numerous modification in the axial layout of Roman peristyle houses.

THE URBAN PORTICATED COURT HOUSE FROM THE HIGH EMPIRE

The porticated court house does not schematically differ from the peristyle house, so far as both share an axial distribution of the main areas. However, they do differ in their central distribution areas (Fig. 2, a-b). In this house, the open space is paved and is not intended as a garden or green area (Cortés, 2014 a: 311-313; Cortés, 2014 b).

It is an ongoing and complex discussion to define what a porticated court, atrium, *atriolum* or peristyle is¹. For example, in Catalonia one finds examples of houses that could wrongly be identified as atrium houses, but after close examination of their architecture and socio-historical context one realizes that they are porticated court houses (Cortés, 2014 c: 126-128).

¹ The Es-Sadra work (2008) which shows the difficulty in identifying some of these spaces in the houses of Volubilis, is a good example to examine this issue.

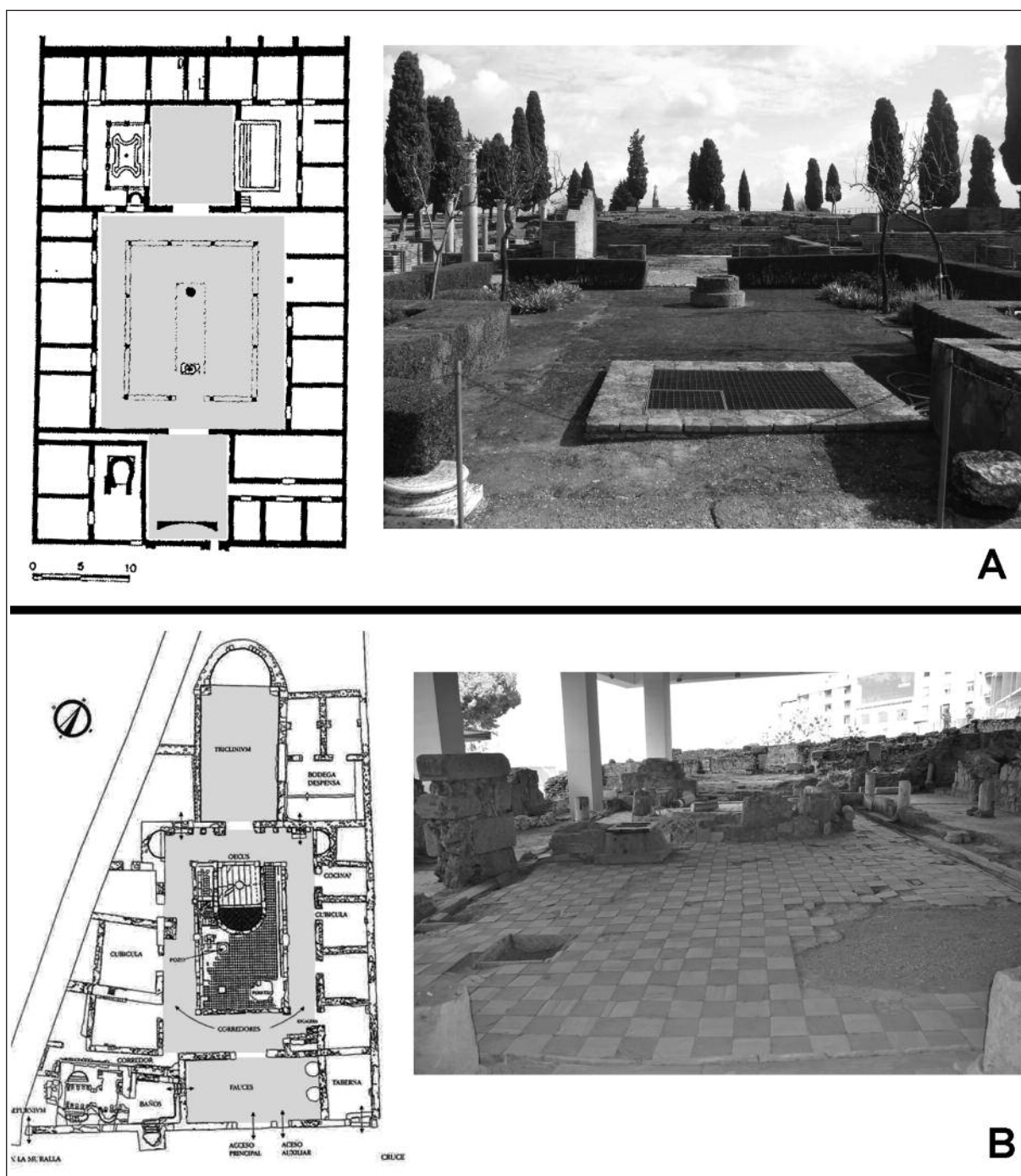


Fig. 2. A: Roman peristyle house (plan: *casa de los pájaros* of Italica, Rodríguez 1991, foto: Ada Cortés); B: Porticated court house (plan: *Casa de los Mármoles*, Alba 1997; photo: Álvaro Corrales).

Thus, the way of identifying these spaces - although complex- is essential to identify the house type correctly. As previously mentioned, the peristyle house and porticated court house must be told apart by their open spaces even if its domestic structure are similar or identical. The important feature, which differentiates one from the other, is that nature becomes a key component of the peristyle house

while in the porticated court it is kept out. This green area in the peristyle must be understood as an extension of the domestic living area and an additional space of *otium*, related to many of the peristyle rooms (Zacaria, 1995: 340). However, man must dominate all natural elements inside the house, taking care of them and cultivating them by practicing the *ars topiaria*.

THE ROMAN GARDEN IN THE PERISTYLE HOUSE

The Roman garden has been the subject of many studies that provides quite a precise picture of what these spaces looked like². No detailed description will be given of the garden, but the importance of the *viridarium* in the peristyle house will be underlined as centerpiece of this gardened Roman plot.

The Roman garden was much more than a green decorative space as there was a psychological interaction with the rooms apart from a functional use³. This cultivated ground and the *otium* in the peristyle was characterized by having many architectural and material elements that denote an anthropic nature. Water was another key element which played a vital role in the garden through a large

number of fountains, ponds, *nymphaea* and water effects. In association with water in the *viridarium* (Fig. 3), one can frequently find *stibadia* and summer *triclinium* (Dunbabin, 1991). The *convivium* common spaces acquired pergolas and porticos that established comfortable areas to remain in the garden. Through frescos and sculptural remains we learn of the existence of domestic and exotic animals that cohabited and decorated the interior of houses. Faunal studies also confirm this practice (García-Entero, 2004: 67).

Thus, the peristyle house garden gathers all these natural controlled elements conceived for the wealthy social sectors, the whole *otium* and the enjoyment of this little paradise within the urban world, while the porticated court house does not.



Fig. 3: *Nymphaea*, water effects and *stibadium* (photos: *Maison aux Colonnes* of Saint Romain en Gal, Nuria Romaní; *Casa de los pájaros* of Italica, Ada Cortés).

CONCLUSION

As discussed, the development of certain social aspects within the private home, is not the same in a peristyle house as in a porticated court house, even if, the latter, is decorated with frescos with nature themes. It is due to this social condition that it becomes important to differentiate both types of houses, which judging from our knowledge of Roman gardens at present, they were perceived differently by the Roman citizens themselves.

One is aware of the archaeological difficulty in correctly identifying the two open space styles since, in the majority of situations; the archaeological remains are quite incomplete. When analyzing and

attempting to define problems of interpretation may arise. As the pavement of a patio is not always preserved, pressed ground does not necessarily mean that there was a garden or the conservation of part of a pavement does not necessarily mean that the whole of the surface was a patio and that there were no gardened areas. For example, some Pompeian gardens were wrongly classified as such because of accumulations of earth as a result of previous excavations (Ciarallo, 2012: 15). Therefore, for the correct identification of the garden it is necessary to bear in mind the presence of the double typology between very similar domestic areas and, optimize the complementary use of archaeological techniques (pollen, fauna, carbon, etc.) to ensure a correct classification.

In conclusion, the two house types share an axial and practical layout, which responds to the domestic necessities from the Imperial period, but the garden

² Cowell, 1978; Jashemski, 1993; Macdougall, Jashemski, 1981; Purcell, 1996; Farrar, 1998, Ciarallo, 2012, between others.

³ To deepen this aspect see Stackelberg, 2009.

and house of the peristyle marks a higher rung in the *convivium* among the same social order.

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